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ABSTRACT

Educators who are responsible for the creation, management, and administration of educational programs are central to the planning process. Research suggests that program planning is not driven by theoretical constructs, but rather by the personal experiences and beliefs of individual planners. This study explores how individuals who plan online programs perceive their roles. Planners' perceptions of their work are important because their perceptions direct their activities, and their activities guide a rapidly expanding segment of educational programs which are impacting a growing learner population. In order to study the perceptions of a geographically diverse group of individuals, this study observed the exchanges of the participants in an international online forum, the Distance Education Online Symposium (DEOS) during a 30-day period in 2000. The 286 messages exchanged in DEOS during the study's period were analyzed using the Constant Comparative Method. This analysis produced an organizational scheme that grouped the respondents' perceptions into four categories: comparison between the online environment and the traditional classroom; impact of the online environment on the individual planner; application of the online environment to the individual planner's discipline; and improvement in how the planner can improve his or her discipline using online technology. (Contains 16 references.) (AEF)

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Issues of the Online Program Planning Process

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Abstract: Educators who are responsible for the creation, management, and administration of educational programs are central to the planning process. Research suggests that program planning is not driven by theoretical constructs, but rather by the personal experiences and beliefs of individual planners. This study explores how individuals who plan online programs perceive their roles. Planners' perceptions of their work are important because their perceptions direct their activities, and their activities guide a rapidly expanding segment of educational programs which are impacting a growing learner population. In order to study the perceptions of a geographically diverse group of individuals, this study observed the exchanges of the participants in an international online forum, the Distance Education Online Symposium (DEOS) during a 30-day period in 2000. The 286 messages exchanged in DEOS during the study's period were analyzed using the Constant Comparative Method. This analysis produced an organizational scheme which grouped the respondents perceptions into four categories.

Introduction

Online education is still in its beginning stages, and research describing what those who design, develop, teach, and administer online programs actually do is only beginning to emerge in the literature. Therefore, it may be useful to draw upon theory from related fields. This study utilized theories from traditional adult education program planning and models of adoption to compare and describe the perceptions online educators have about their work. The framework developed may be used as a basis of comparison for other populations of online educators, as a way of thinking about the professional development needs of those who work with online programs, and as a basis for future research.

A Review of the Literature

A number of authors in the field of adult education program planning argue that the actions of individuals who plan programs are guided not by theoretical models, but rather by their personal skills, interests, experience, and educational philosophy (Brookfiled, 1986; Cervero, 1991; Darkenwald, 1982; Wilson, 1995). In the absence of research-based models of online program planning or evidence to suggest those who plan online programs work from theoretical constructs, this study begins with the assumption that the actions of online program planners are guided by the planner's personal framework. Therefore, an investigation of planners' activities through examining planners' perceptions about their role and the work they perform is necessary.

While research from the field of adult education program planning suggests that investigation into the actual practice of online program planning needs to begin by examining the perceptions planners have about their work, models describing adoption of innovations provide a foundation for comparing the results of this

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study. While there are several models describing the adoption process (such as the Paradoxical Disjunction Model (Cravener, 1999); the Model of Diffusion (Dooley, 1995); the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (Hall, Wallace, and Dossett, 1973) and (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, and Hall, 1987); and the Technology Acceptance Model (Wolski and Jackson, 1999)), most adoption models have their roots in Rogers (1962, 1965), work on adoption theory.

Roger's (1962) classic work on diffusion theory argues that adoption of an innovation is distributed along a normal, bell-shaped curve if plotted over time on a frequency basis. The first group to adopt an innovation is the "innovators," and they are followed closely by the "early adopters". The next group is the "early majority," which is followed by the "late majority". Finally, the "laggards" are the last group to adopt an innovation (for a variety of reasons). The innovator group --those who are first to adopt a new technology --are described as intrinsically motivated, self-taught, experimenters (Wertheimer and Zinga, 1997), who are comfortable with change, and attracted to challenges and risks (Hadley and Sheingold, 1993). When all or most of the members of the innovator category (those first to adopt a new technology) have adopted the innovation, it is referred to as the saturation point; and Geoghegan (1994) suggests that the saturation has been reached for innovators of instructional technology.

Building on Rogers (1962) work is Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, and Hall's (1987) Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM). When confronted with a new challenge, technology, or process, CBAM argues that individuals undergoing change are focused on their own awareness (of the issue/need), desire for information, and personal concerns. That is, people undergoing change are going to be more concerned about gaining information about how the change will impact them personally. Once individuals have gained some experience with the innovation, they move away from the intense need for information and into stages focused on consequence, collaboration, and refocusing. How an individual perceives the innovation will determine how quickly the individual moves from initial inquiry to adoption.

Theories of program planning and adoption of innovations intersect at their mutual focus on the individual's personal perspective. How individuals perceive their program planning process has a direct impact on the resulting program. As program planners adopt the innovation of online technology, how they perceive these innovations influence their rate of adoption. As such, the design of this study focused on the perceptions of individuals responsible for planning online education programs in order to develop a framework to guide future inquiry. This design is briefly described in the following section.

Research Design

Two main issues shaped the design of this study. First, if one accepts the premise that program planners' actions are guided not by theoretical models but rather by their personal framework, then one should examine the actual practice of planners in order to discover the issues planners attend to. Second, as this study is concerned more with planners and less with the actual tasks of the planning process, one needs an unvarnished view of how planners perceive their work. Contributing to these issues is Rogers' (1995) position that innovators tend not to cluster around geographic centers but rather around others with similar interests. Therefore, an online community of practitioners was selected as the population for this study. Observation of an online group allowed the data to be collected without the respondents being influenced by the presence of a researcher, or what Goetz called the "Observer Effect" (1984). The population selected for this study was the participants of the Distance Education Online Symposium (DEOS), created in 1991 by Pennsylvania State University.

Data were collected during January 2000 and were analyzed using the Constant Comparative Method (CCM). As first described by Glaser (1967), CCM was applied in a rhythmic fashion which produced four themes or categories. These categories describe the issues the DEOS participants raised during the time period the study was conducted. These themes were compared to adoption models to produce an organizational scheme that describes the issues the members of DEOS addressed during January 2000. While the results of this study should not be generalized and applied to other populations or circumstances, they can serve as a basis of comparison for future research. A brief description of the findings as well as a discussion of how they relate to adoption models is addressed in the following section.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the data produced an organizational scheme which grouped respondents' perceptions into four themes. Those groupings are: Comparison (between the online environment and the traditional classroom), Impact (of the online environment on the individual planner), Application (of the online environment to the individual planner's discipline), and Improvement (how the planner can improve his/her discipline using online technology).

Comparison

The comparison theme is reflected in DEOS members' messages which center on comparing familiar concepts and elements to the online environment. Data corresponding to this theme describe the online environment by comparing it to the traditional classroom, learners, and process. This is the largest theme, accounting for 34.8% of the entire dataset.

Building on Rogers' (1962) work is Hord, et al's (1987) Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM), which argues that individuals will begin the adoption process by first becoming aware of alternatives and then gathering information about alternatives when confronted with a new challenge, technology, or process. This initial questioning stage is consistent with the theme of comparison in that the individual confronting a change will usually begin by gathering information --in this case, by comparing the online environment to a known environment. While the design of this study sought only to categorize the DEOS participants' responses, comparing adoption models to these findings suggests this may be the first phase program planners would move through as they move their practice to an online environment.

Impact

Messages in this theme reflect a concern the respondent had about how the topic (of the message) would impact them on a personal level. This theme is the second-largest one, comprising 26.1% of the total dataset. While the messages in this theme address a range of topics, many of them reflect the respondent's concern about the time involved, or required by, the topic of discussion. In other words, the messages in this theme reflect the respondents addressing how the topic of discussion would impact them personally by focusing on how much time was required to engage in a particular task.

The theme of how the online environment impacts the program planner personally is tied to Rogers' (1995) work on diffusion models, and is not unusual when one sees this process through the lens of the program planner moving their practice into a new environment. Cravener (1999) explains this behavior, in part, through the Paradoxical Disjunction Model: "Paradoxically, the faculty rarely are interested in new technologies to support teaching and learning. The faculty are predominantly focused on psychosocial factors: personal affective issues and their need to meet institutional requirements for tenure" (p. 1). This idea can be seen in the respondents' discussion of how the online environment impacts them as individuals.

Application

This theme is reflected in messages that explore the application of online programming in an individual's professional practice. In other words, messages in this theme address the question, "How can I apply (the message topic) to my own practice?" Messages in this theme address a broad range of issues from topics dealing with organizational concerns to topics of professional development of an individual.

The application theme illustrates the environmental context --from the broadest organizational perspective, to the more narrow personal perspective, that shapes a program planner's activities. Fullan (1991) describes the process of incorporating educational technology into practice as complex and multidimensional. Fullan writes that this sort of change requires the use of new or revised materials (curriculum, resources), the possibility of having to use new approaches to teaching (teaching strategies, approaches), and the possible alteration of beliefs (pedagogical assumptions and theories and underlying methods). These types of changes cut across the organizational environment and the individual's personal beliefs and past experience. The theme

of application is seen again in the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM). Hord et al. (1987), showed that as individuals gain experience with an innovation, they move away from an intense need for information and into stages of consequence, collaboration, and refocusing. Individuals in these stages are focused on integrating the innovation into their personal practice. As individuals develop sufficient mastery of the innovation, they begin to expand their vision to address issues of improving their larger field of practice, which is reflected in the final theme of improvement.

Improvement

This theme is reflected in messages that explore how to expand or improve distance education as a discipline. Much of the discussion in this theme addressed broad issues, such as industry trends, purpose of distance education, and organizational change. Once program planners have successfully integrated online programming into their practice, they began to consider the larger context of their field. This need to share ideas and connect to a larger context is explained, in part, by Schein (1992), who writes:

> Once we have developed an integrated set of such assumptions, which might be called a thought world or mental map, we will be maximally comfortable with others who share the same set of assumptions and very uncomfortable and vulnerable in situations where different assumptions operate because we will not understand what is going on. (pgs. 22-23)

In other words, we are more comfortable with those who share our ideas and beliefs. Program planners who have integrated online programming into their practice will likely seek out these others by gravitating to groups who hold similar beliefs or work to educate their existing reference group.

Recommendations

Because the purpose of the study was to identify planners' perceptions of their work, it did not test for relationships between the four themes of the organizational scheme. As such, future research should investigate not only the validity of the organizational scheme but the relationship between the themes as well. A comparison of this study's findings with literature on models of innovation adoption suggests that online program planners may progress through the four themes as their practice evolves—a hypothesis for which there is little evidence to affirm or deny.

Additionally, a review of the literature related to planning adult education programs suggests the environment in which a program is created has a great deal of influence over its design and conduct. The concept of situated cognition states that learning is not just influenced by the environment but that learning is in fact shaped and defined by the context in which it occurs. Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) wrote that the learning situation "co-produces" knowledge, meaning that what is learned can not be neatly dissected from the context in which it was learned and how that knowledge is applied (1989, p. 32). The impact of the environment is similarly addressed in discussions of the planning process. Wilson and Cervero (1996) address the influence of the politics of power in the planning environment writing: "Any account of program planning must address both power and responsibility in order to be of any practical help in the every day world" (p. 9). Pennington and Green's (1976) comparative analysis of 52 continuing education program planners found that the planner's perspective and the environment in which they work had a much greater influence on the program produced than any theoretical construct. "Planning continuing professional education programs is a highly individualistic activity as the planner moves through the development process," they write. "The decisions planners make to keep the program development process moving involve consideration of the environment in which they are operating, internal and external constraints and resources, and the possible outcome of any decisions" (p. 23). A review of adult education literature regarding the influence of the environment on the planning process suggests there is an interaction between a planner's perception and the planing environment. However, as with a comparison to adoption models, there is no evidence to support or reject this hypothesis; thus further research needs to investigate the possibility of a connection between a planner's perception and their environment.

This study began from the premise that discussions of online learning typically focus more on the learners and their experiences and less on the educators who create and work with the programs. As such, this

study took the position that educators' issues are the ones that have broader impact and greater implications. This is not to suggest that questions related to online learning are not important –they are critical. However, it was well beyond the scope of this study to consider the entire dynamic of the educator and online learner. Considering which part of the educator-learner dynamic to address, one part of the equation has to be considered first. Obviously, additional research needs to address the perceptions online learners have of their experience and how their perceptions influence their performance.

This study represents only one small step towards understanding the process of creating online programs. As the number of online programs grows, it becomes increasingly important to understand the process of creating, implementing, and administering these programs. How educators perceive their roles as online program planners is critical, as they are creating an ever-expanding number of online programs which are influencing a growing group of learners. Understanding more about the education process is critical because education changes people's lives.

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